

Retributive Justice in Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 31 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 30 Sep 2025; Accepted: 03 Oct 2025; Available online: 08 Oct 2025 ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords – <i>Retributive justice, moral philosophy, Machiavellianism, systemic injustice, legal philosophy</i>	<i>The Count of Monte Cristo</i> by Alexandre Dumas is a classic French novel that tells the story of Edmond Dantes, a sailor who has been wrongly accused of treason by three of his friends, namely Danglars, Fernand Mondego and Caderousse and as a result of which he was sent to the infamous tower prison, Chateau d'If to serve a life sentence. Eventually, Dantes is able to get out of prison and after carefully planning his revenge for nearly a decade, he reinvents himself as the mysterious Count of Monte Cristo with only one thing in mind: vengeance. This paper examines the meticulously planned revenge executed by Dantes through the lens of moral philosophy, namely the concept of retributive justice to determine if Dantes's vengeance against his conspirators is justified.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Count of Monte Cristo is one of the most prominent works produced in French literature that narrates the complex tale of deviously well-thought-out revenge on the part of the protagonist of the novel, Edmond Dantes. Jealous of Dantes's success, and for means of personal gain, his associates Danglars, Fernand and Villefort plot against him to cause him to fall from grace, which they succeed in. Though he possessed knowledge of Dantes's innocence, the prosecutor-in-charge, Villefort, out of personal concern, condemned him to a life-long prison sentence in the infamous Chateau d'If. Dantes's heart hardened with the years in prison leaving him yearning for one thing only: revenge.

Many may consider Dantes as a Machiavellian character that destroyed the lives of many. Rather it is the

characters surrounding Dantes that possessed a Machiavellian nature while he, innocent and unassuming, suffered from their scheming. If viewed from the perspective of retribution, his actions seem justified, encouraged even. Where does one turn when the very legal system that is guaranteed to give the victim justice fails him? Dantes took matters upon his own hands, believing himself to be an "agent of the Providence." Inspected under the light of retribution and other schools of law and philosophical thought, Dantes's actions begin to make sense as he inserted himself in place of the faulty legal system, acting as God's emissary on earth.

II. DANTES'S TRANSFORMATION INTO THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

Dantes starts off as an innocent and unassuming nineteen-year-old boy who nurtures hope in his heart that justice will be served to him one day. But, the days bleed into weeks, the weeks into months, and the months into thirteen long years, but justice never knocks on the door of Chateau d'If. With time, his hope and faith in humanity and in its goodness erodes away and is replaced by wrath and anger for all that is unjust in this world. He endures nearly every agonizing emotion known to humanity during his time in captivity. One must understand how despair and anguish transforms the mind of one resigned to a life of such alienating desolation.

With time, he realizes that there were sinister motives of those close to him that had much to gain from endangering his life. After such a realization dawns upon someone, what incentive do they have to continue being good and just? If assuming the best of everyone lands one's life in absolute ruin, one might as well become cunning. If telling the truth is such a cardinal sin that it takes the very things one treasures—love, ambition, family, and friends—away from him, it is wiser to lie. If being just gets one penalized in an unjust world, it is best to learn from the rulebook of the unjust. The injustice committed against Dantes is precisely what transforms him into the devilish character he becomes when he takes on the identity of the Count of Monte Cristo. It would not be a startling claim to suggest that Monte Cristo is the creation of a corrupt society, one in which even the righteous must adopt immorality to survive among those who cloak their wickedness in the guise of virtue. Hence, Dantes's transformation is only a natural consequence of the conspiracy that was plotted against him.

The concept of God and divinity is weaved intricately into the fabric of this story which paints many scenes under a Biblical light. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Dantes has a rebirth, a baptism of a kind, especially considering Dantes's body was hurled into the water. The water transformed him, wiping away with it the identity of Dantes. The one who emerged from the water was not the commoner Dantes, but the

noble Count of Monte Cristo. Since God has renewed him and given him grace against all odds, he takes it upon himself to become the "avenging angel" of God. Since he now believes himself to be "an instrument of God," he makes it his life's mission to avenge those who have hurt not only him, but also his loved ones. His attitude is perfectly captured in the following lines: "Farewell, goodness, humanity, gratitude. I have taken the place of Providence to reward the good. Now, let the avenging God make way for me to punish the wrongdoer" (Dumas, 300).

III. EARLY ROOTS OF RETRIBUTION

The concept of retribution can be traced back all the way to Biblical roots such as in the Old Testament and the Exodus where the concept of "an eye for an eye" came from. In his paper, *An Eye for An Eye*, Fisher writes:

This conclusion is supported by a contextual interpretation of the Pentateuch. In Exodus, an 'eye for an eye' is preceded, as we have seen, by a 'life for a life'. The provision does not distinguish between accidental and intentional harm. Mosaic law, however, does not mandate the death penalty for unintentional homicide. It has therefore been argued that neither 'life for a life' nor 'eye for an eye' can be taken literally, but must instead be understood as mandating proper and full compensation (p.60).

At first sight, the statement "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand" may seem barbaric. However, it is quite the opposite as the statement establishes the ground for equality. Anybody's eye is as precious as anybody else's. The nobleman's eye is no more precious than the peasant's eye. It does not matter what one's social standing is, any and all deserve justice. This statement gives everybody their due respect by securing their right to compensation in the face of damage.

Dantes echoes a similar sentiment of justice when he says, "It is with the criminal procedure of all nations that I have compared natural justice, and I must say, sir, that it is the law of primitive nations, that is, the law of

retaliation that I have most frequently found to be according to the law of God" (Dumas, 397).

IV. LEX TALIONIS

The most ancient legal code dating back all the way to the Mosaic Law and the Code of Hammurabi, which is still relevant to this day is the concept of Lex Talionis, a Latin term which translates to "law of retaliation." "The lex talionis under Mosaic law advocated the direct punishment of the wrongdoer." (Fisher, 60)

"The classification [of crimes and punishments] ... has been assumed to be fundamentally retributive, and so its penalty schedule must be based on two basic retributive principles: (1) the severity of the punishment must be proportional to the gravity of the offense, and (2) the gravity of the offense must be a function of fault in the offender and harm caused the victim. These two "basic principles" (or part of them) are often referred to as "lex talionis""(Davis, 236).

Dantes punished his offenders following the above two principles. He was harmed gravely by the conspiracy plotted against him and so, he sought to punish those who played with his life like a toy in proportionate amount. "Because the classification of crimes and punishments is retributive, it must, Bedau says, be based on lex talionis. And, for the same reason, the penalties provided must be a function of fault in the offender and harm done the victim" (Davis, 236).

V. LAW OF PROPORTIONALITY

Dantes is practicing what is known as the *Law of Proportionality*. "As a general principle of corrective justice, lex talionis requires the wrongdoer to suffer as much as (but no more than) he has wrongfully made others suffer. The first of Bedau's "two basic principles," that is, the principle that punishment should be proportioned to the gravity of the offense or otherwise made to "fit the crime" (Davis, 238)

This idea forms "the core of what Hershenov calls the atonement/debt theory of punishment. The currency of the debt and the mechanism of atonement is, on his account, harm, or displeasure. The victim is compensated by the wrongdoer's suffering: "[t]he debt

the criminal owes his victim can be paid when the latter takes his legal revenge on the former." The wrongdoer's humbling, in turn, affords him the means to atone for his wrongs" (Klimchuk, 81).

VI. THE UNFAIR ADVANTAGE PRINCIPLE

Another perspective for the justification of Dantes actions can be viewed from the lens of the "unfair-advantage principle," a term Davis coined. All the people living in a society agree to a certain set of rules to live in harmony and to ascertain the security of others within the community. One of these rules is to abide by the law and respect others right to security and well-being. When one breaks this rule by harming another, the former offender has an unfair advantage over the latter victim. It is this unfair advantage for which the offender shall pay his dues. As Michael Davis states in his paper *Harm and Retribution*:

According to the unfair-advantage principle, it is this advantage the criminal law is supposed to take back by punishing the criminal for his crime. The advantage bears no necessary relation to the harm the criminal actually did. For example, he may have done great damage and only committed theft; or no damage at all even though he tried to commit murder. According to the unfair-advantage principle, the damage a criminal actually does is between him and his victim, a private matter to be settled by civil suit (or the moral equivalent). His crime consists only in the unfair advantage he necessarily took over the law-abiding by breaking the law in question. The measure of punishment due is the relative value of that unfair advantage (p.240).

In this case, Dantes's conspirators must suffer because they wielded an unfair advantage over him. If these men go unpunished, it is a slap to the face to all the other law-abiding citizens. What was Dantes's fault? Abiding the law? The very lawmakers and prosecutors who are supposed to protect the rights of the innocent are the ones who turn on them quicker than anybody else as seen in the character of Villefort. The damage of thirteen years of lost time, love and career development are all

gone and those remain a "private matter" to be settled between Dantes and his conspirators. It is the failure of the "civil suit" that caused him more harm than the false framing of his crime. Had he been given a proper trial, justice would have prevailed. It is this failure that Dantes took upon himself, to right the wrongs of the faulty legal system. With nobody to come and save him, he is his only saving grace. He is out to punish the unfair advantage those men took over him.

VII. RETRIBUTION ACCORDING TO KANTIAN ETHICS

Moreover, assessed from a deontological perspective, the Kantian ethics described in the categorical imperative were also violated. Kant stated "act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." The Golden Rule states that one should treat others as they want to be treated. Kant further says, "so act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end and never as only a means." Fernand, Danglars and Villefort violated all of the Kantian principles by treating Dantes as a means to an end, a vessel through which they could realize their ambitions. By what standard of justice should such men be allowed to roam free? "If the guilty are not punished, according to Kant, justice and equality, the only proper foundations for the law, will not have been served" (Fisher, 63).

Margarett Falls in her paper *Retribution, Reciprocity and Respect for Persons* further elaborates on the Kantian conditions that permit the law of retribution. In Dantes's case, the following three claims hold true and therefore he is justified in his quest for vengeance.

The *jus talionis* states that one who voluntarily causes the undue suffering of another deserves "like" suffering in return. This one principle actually contains three distinct but interrelated claims:

- (i) Punishment is justified only if it is deserved.
- (ii) It is deserved if and only if the person punished has voluntarily done a wrong (and, specifically, the wrong being punished).

- (iii) The severity of punishment deserved is that which is proportionate to the severity of the wrongdoing (p.27).

VIII. A UTILITARIAN PERSPECTIVE ON RETRIBUTION

From a utilitarian perspective, viewed under the lens of a consequentialist theory of punishment, "the principal aim of punishment is the prevention of offences, rather than retribution" (Fisher, 63). Jeremy Bentham says:

When we consider that an unpunished crime leaves the path of crime open, not only to the same delinquent but also to all those who may have the same motives and opportunities for entering upon it, we perceive that punishment inflicted on the individual becomes a source of security for all (p.64).

Apart from the retributive aspect of Dantes revenge, it also serves a purpose of deterrence from further crimes as such, not only from the perpetrators themselves, but also those who may be entertaining the idea of committing the same felony. "Punishment may in this context be seen as an incentive to reform: for convicted offenders, therapeutic reform, by inducing a consciousness of guilt that might motivate them to mend their ways; for potential offenders, punishment of the guilty provides an incentive to pre-emptive or prophylactic reform" (Fisher, 64).

IX. DANTES'S REVENGE AGAINST HIS CONSPIRATORS

Danglars, who coveted Dantes' success, resented him for being demoted to first mate while Dantes rose to the position of Captain of the *Pharaon*. Danglars is a ruthless character that is corrupted by greed and will stop at nothing to increase his wealth, even going as far to sell his own daughter, Eugenie Danglars, into a loveless marriage in return for three million francs. Dantes, or rather, The Count of Monte Cristo tricked Danglars many times by manipulating the ebb and flow of the foreign market, slowly causing him to lose all his money. His downfall began with him losing a million francs in the stock market (due to false information

relayed to him by his wife which was all orchestrated by Dantes himself) and ended with him being held in captivity just like Dantes in Chateau d'If and threatened with the prospect of starvation. Even then, he wanted to hold on to his remaining wealth rather than pay for the food, which just further highlights his avarice.

Fernand was covetous of Dantes's fiancé, the beautiful Mercedes and with Dantes out of the way, he was able to marry her. After the success of his scheme against Dantes, he goes on to become a soldier who gained influence in the post-Napoleonic era and became a Count by stealing money from Ali Pasha whom he ends up killing. All this is brought to light by the cunning of Dantes as Fernand's misdeeds are first exposed in a newspaper gaining media coverage. Then came the public trial where Haydee, the daughter of Ali Pasha testified against Fernand. The most painful of all these blows was the departure of his wife Mercedes and his son, Albert from his life. With no more will to live after losing his reputation and family, he commits suicide.

Villefort's dark past with Madame Danglers came to light during the trial of Andrea Cavalcanti, the illegitimate son of Villefort and Madame Danglers, who tells his story of how his father dug up a grave to bury him in, but he was rescued by Bertuccio. Villefort's reputation as a Chief Prosecutor is completely destroyed.

Dantes's revenge for each of the three men pierced them right on their Achilles's heel. Danglers only cared about growing his wealth without regard to whom it hurt in the process. Similarly, Dantes also brought him to the brink of financial ruin making him nearly destitute. Fernand's weak spot was Mercedes. The very person whom he betrayed his dear friend for has now deserted him. For Villefort, the most important thing was his reputation and the furthering of his career. While looking through the prison records, Dantes finds that Villefort falsely accused him of being a "fanatical Bonapartist." He even went to show the proof of the letter to the monarchy to secure his position as Chief Prosecutor. All that he has been carefully building for thirteen years came tumbling down, the effort of a lifetime gone down the drain. Dantes's plan for revenge for each of the men fit the severity of their crime.

X. A DIVINE VESSEL FOR JUSTICE

Towards the end of the novel, Dantes felt he had gone too far in his quest for vengeance, as innocent lives suffered too. He desperately wanted to find a sign that he had not made a mistake in his desire for revenge. He visited Chateau d'If, now a tourist spot, where the guard gave him Abbe Faria's manuscript on the monarchy of Italy. The epigraph of the book read: "You will pull the dragon's teeth and trample the Lions underfoot, said the Lord." A contentment took over him as he felt justified in his cunning trap of revenge. "I owe it to God to take my revenge. He has sent me for that purpose. Here I am," thought Dantes.

Linda Radzik defines resentment as "a reactive attitude characterized by the judgment that one has been wronged, a feeling of moral anger toward the one responsible, and either a desire to punish or (at least) a withdrawal of goodwill. In resenting, they argue, a victim shows proper respect for himself, for morality and for the offender. Indeed, a lack of resentment leads us to worry that the victim might be condoning his own victimization or viewing the offender as if she were a child or an animal, that is, something less than a competent moral agent."

XI. CONCLUSION

Danglers, Fernand and Villefort are all as much of a moral agent as is Dantes, but they failed to uphold their duty as moral citizens and thus their punishment was a justified consequence of their failure to uphold morality. Holmgren in her book, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, views forgiveness as "a corrective attitude that replaces an initial attitude of resentment that we no longer find worthy" (p. 32). It is because Dantes's thirst for vengeance was quenched, his need for revenge was purified out of his being that he was able to reach this compassionate stance of understanding and empathy that he comes to possess at the end of the story. Had he not acted upon the injustice done to him, his mercy would be nowhere to be found as his heart would have been charred with the burning desire for revenge

compelling him develop a tunnel vision set on accomplishing a singular, deadly mission.

According to the “Law of Proportionality” and the “Law of Retaliation” described in *lex talionis*, Dantès was justified in his act of vengeance. His revenge is also justified under the lens of the *unfair-advantage principle*, according to which he was only pursuing justice to collect his dues for the unfair advantage his offenders took of him. Further, his action is supported by both the Kantian Ethics and Utilitarianism which suggests that he did the French society a great favor by ridding them of the corrupt aristocrats that would have made life difficult for an even greater number of people.

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